

Yom Kippur 5781 – Yizkor Sermon

We recite the Yizkor service four times a year: Yom Kippur and the three pilgrimage festivals.

Originally, Yizkor was only recited once a year, today, on Yom Kippur. The holiday is called “yom hakippurim,” the day of atonements, in the plural. The rabbis teach that the plural reflects that the day brings atonement for both the living and for the dead, which makes it an appropriate time to remember the dead.

Yizkor may feel a little different on each of occasions that we recite it. On Shmini Atzeret, at the end of Sukkot with the emphasis on being outdoors, we might recall times we spent with our loved ones outdoors, or in our sukkahs. On Pesach, with the emphasis on the seder, we may feel most strongly the absence of our loved ones from our holiday tables. On Shavuot, when we commemorate the receiving of the Torah, we may especially reflect on the Torah, the teachings, the instructions, the lessons we have learned from our loved ones who are no longer with us.

Yom Kippur is a day that’s a dress rehearsal for our death. We don’t eat, drink, or have marital relations; the dead do none of those things. Many people have the custom to wear a kittel, a simple white robe, reminiscent of the tachrichim, the simple white shrouds that we are buried in.

Our prayers take on special urgency as we plead for another year. Another year to live. Another year to be with our spouses, children, grandchildren, other family members, friends. Another year to accomplish things yet undone.

We become more tuned in to our own mortality, and nothing serves as a sharper reminder than the Unatana Tokef prayer, asking “who will live, and who will die? Who after a long life, who before their time?”

Yom Kippur 5781 – Yizkor Sermon

This year, with the coronavirus raging around the world, with nearly a million deaths around the globe from this terrible disease, we are especially reminded of the fragility of life. We are reminded of how seemingly random “who shall live and who shall die” may seem. While the mortality rate is much higher for senior citizens than for young adults, it does also kill some young adults, even ones who were previously healthy with no pre-existing conditions. Scientists as yet have no explanation for why some people get asymptomatic cases, some people get mild cases, some people are slammed and end up in the hospital, struggling for months, and others die.

The seeming randomness reinforces what we know – that ultimately who will live and who will die is in the hands of God.

As we reflect on our own mortality, we may find ourselves wondering about the afterlife. What happens after we die? Is this life all there is?

Judaism does not offer one universally accepted picture of the nature of olam haba, the world to come. However, we do affirm that we have a soul, and we affirm that the soul survives.

This is beautifully illustrated in a story, author unknown, that was shared by Rabbi Micah Caplan, z”l:

When I was quite young, my father had one of the first telephones in our neighborhood. I remember well the polished, old case, fastened to the wall. The shiny receiver hung on the side of the box. I was too little to reach the telephone but used to listen with fascination when my mother used to talk to it.

Then I discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person. Her name was "information please" and there was nothing she did not know. "Information please" could supply anybody's number and the correct time.

Yom Kippur 5781 – Yizkor Sermon

My first personal experience with this genie in the bottle came one day while my mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing myself at the tool bench of the basement, I whacked my finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible, but there didn't seem to be any reason for crying because there was no one home to give sympathy. I walked around the house sucking my throbbing finger, finally arriving at the stairway. The telephone! Quickly, I ran for the footstool in the parlor and dragged it to the landing. Climbing up, I unhooked the receiver in the parlor and held it to my ear. "Information please," I said into the mouthpiece just above my head. A click or two and a small voice spoke into my ear.

"Information." "I hurt my finger..." I wailed into the phone. The tears came readily enough now that I had an audience. "Isn't your mother home?" came the question. "Nobody's home but me," I blubbered.

"Are you bleeding?" the voice asked. "No" I replied. "I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts." "Can you open your icebox?" she asked. I said I could. "Then chip off a little piece of ice and hold it to your finger," said the voice.

After that I called "Information please" for everything. I asked her for help with my geography and she told me where Philadelphia was. She helped me with my math. She told me that my pet chipmunk, which I had caught in the park just the day before, would eat fruit and nuts.

Then there was the time that Petey, our pet canary died. I called information please" and told her the sad story. She listened, and then said the unusual things grown-ups say to soothe a child. But I was unconsolated. I asked her "why is it that birds should sing so beautifully, and bring joy to all families, only to end up as a heap of feathers on the bottom of a cage?" She must have sensed my deep concern, for she said quietly, "Paul, always remember that there are other worlds to sing in."

Yom Kippur 5781 – Yizkor Sermon

Another day, I was on the telephone. "Information please." "Information", said the now familiar voice. "How do you spell fix?" I asked. All this took place in a small town in the Pacific Northwest.

When I was nine years old, we moved across the country to Boston. I missed my friend very much. "Information please" belonged in that old wooden box back home and I somehow never thought of trying the tall, shiny new phone that sat on the table in the hall. As I grew into my teens, the memories of those childhood conversations never really left me. Often, in moments of doubt and perplexity, I would recall the serene sense of security I had then. I appreciate now how patient, understanding and kind she was to have spent her time on a little boy.

A few years later, on my way west to college, my plane put down in Seattle. I had about a half an hour or so between planes. I spent about fifteen minutes on the phone with my sister, who lived there now. Then, without thinking what I was doing, I dialed my hometown operator and said, "information please." Miraculously, I heard the small, clear voice I knew so well. "Information." I hadn't planned this, but I heard myself saying, "could you please tell me how to spell fix?" There was a long pause. Then came the soft spoken answer, "I guess your finger must have healed by now." I laughed. "So it's really still you," I said. "I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me during this time." "I wonder," she said, "if you know how much your calls meant to me. I never had any children and I used to look forward to your calls."

I told her how often I had thought of her over the years and I asked her if I could call her again when I came back to visit my sister. "Please do, she said. "Just ask for Sally."

Three months later, I was back in Seattle. A different voice answered. "Information." I asked for Sally. "Are you a friend?" she said. "Yes, a very old

Yom Kippur 5781 – Yizkor Sermon

friend," I answered. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this," she said, "Sally had been working part time the last few years because she was sick. She died five weeks ago."

Before I could hang up she said, "wait a minute." Did you say your name was Paul?" "Yes" I responded. "Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down in case you called. Let me read it to you. The note said, "tell him I still say there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean." I thanked her and hung up the phone. I knew what Sally meant.

As we sing the familiar holiday melodies, we may be reminded of our loved ones who are no longer here singing with us. It's a time to reflect on the lives of those who are now singing in another world.

We can still feel the presence of our loved ones, even after they have passed away. It may feel like we could still call them on the phone, if only we knew the right area code.

But the truth is, you don't need a phone. The special area code you need to dial to reach your loved ones is not one that requires pushing buttons on a phone. It's a code in your heart. Whenever we think of our loved ones, when we reflect on their lives, when we remember their presence, they are there.

Their soul is surviving, continuing beyond their life.

I close with a poem from the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai:

The body is the reason for love
Afterwards it is the fortress that guards it
Afterwards it is love's prison.
But when the body dies, the love goes free from it,
In great abundance

Yom Kippur 5781 – Yizkor Sermon

Like a broken slot-machine
Instantly disgorging
With a thundering ring all the coins
Of all the generations of luck.